

Home Computers Spawn 'User Groups'

By JOHN TEETS
Chicago Sun-Times

The circuits are still humming after the last two columns about home computer hookups. Both generated quite a flurry of phone calls, letters and "electronic mail" — messages transmitted via computer systems for "pickup" whenever the user signs on. But one reader made some especially good points, considering that most home computing systems of any respectable power and size need an initial investment of \$1,000 and up.

One system I mentioned, the Bally/AstroVision Arcade, started out as a home game, though some wily users have managed to modify it into quite a tool for video graphics, basic computation, home-to-home communication, music with multiple-part harmony and other functions.

A USER from Lake Villa, Ill., sent along several issues of the "Arcadian," a newsletter for an informal group of Bally owners on how it works, what they are doing with it and what they hope to accomplish. It is pretty impressive. His impassioned followup wasn't bad either, in the realm of unsolicited testimonials.

Although this information doesn't begin to point out all the features of the Bally, you can get some sort of idea where we are going with this.

"In the four years the Bally has been on the market, nothing has even come close to matching its features at a \$300 price. For instance, I have 256 colors (various shadings for display of the computer's doings on a color television set, instead of more mundane black-and-white displays on some home computer systems). As far as I know, that is 240 more than any other machine regardless of price.

"I have no connection with Bally and am telling you this because I'm tired of being ignored. I rarely see any mention of Bally in articles, advertising or stores. This is due to production problems and poor marketing by Bally. Fortunately, AstroVision of Ohio now owns the Bally Arcade, so I hope some of that will change. This ignorance of the Bally and its features has caused a sad lack of software from independents, which is why I am promoting this machine to anyone who'll listen."

IMAGINE WHAT he will be saying later this year, when Bally/AstroVision is expected to come out with an even more advanced version of the machine. Already, clever users have modified their devices to hook into The Source computing service (similar to the competing CompuServe network mentioned during the last two weeks).

Besides news, weather, sports, information and basic computing, one user I talked to has even used his access to The Source to order airline tickets: Fire up the home terminal, call the computer on the telephone, link the two together, scan through flight schedules, determine ticket price, charge the cost to a credit card and have the tickets sent to his home address. At no point did he deal with a human — or get put on hold.

TO GET TIPS, air gripes and share techniques on such

home video magic, owners of small systems have taken the "user group" idea from big-business clients of major computer companies. On a corporate level, these are loose confederations of a company's major clients — representatives of newspapers that have purchased a particular typesetting system, for example, or of companies that have installed computers to manage giant payroll accounts and inventories. By getting together, they can share both pleasant and unpleasant news — the availability or delay of a new program, for example — or discover common problems with either hardware (the machinery) or software (the programs that run it).

User groups also tend to wield megawatts of power when a computer company screws up: It is more effective when 24 clients shout their dissatisfaction with some aspect of service than when the complaints filter in individually — and get dismissed the same way.

BESIDES subscribing to the "Arcadian," some Bally buyers in Chicago; Milwaukee; San Jose, Calif., and Long Island, N.Y., either have set up user groups or are organizing them. Atari user groups have formed in Eugene, Ore., and Arvada, Colo., and various TRS-80 groups are springing up as well.

Many universities and community colleges offer home computer courses for those who would like to learn before they buy. And for more specialized information on home computers, including some side-by-side analyses of different systems, look for magazines like Byte, Creative Computing and the like.

PIRATES' PENANCE: One West Coast subscription TV system (the kind that requires home decoders for scrambled broadcasts) has found yet another way to harry the crafty types who build or buy bootleg decoders. They already have gone to court to seek legal punishment for the pirates; now they are focusing on the pirates' customers. They are broadcasting ear-splitting howls during regular programming — but only the pirates pick it up; legitimate decoders squelch the noise. That should be sufficient warning to those who might be tempted to shell out \$75 or \$100 (or more) for a black-market unit.

LOOK, UP IN THE SKY: Home receivers for satellite transmissions are starting to come closer to Earth, in terms of price. At the recent winter Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Nev., some manufacturers were showing cheap antennas, more sophisticated amplifiers and fancier tuners. Cost for a good home system is now less than \$2,000 and falling.

SWITCHING CHANNELS: In another development on the "bird" beat, AT&T has petitioned the FCC to carry some "experimental" satellite broadcasts for NBC. This could be the start of a beautiful corporate relationship (and, perhaps, presage the end of NBC's use of the Western Union Westar satellite service).